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Report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on regional statistical development in Western Asia

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-first session (see E/2010/24, chap. I.A), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on regional statistical development. It summarizes the challenges to and priorities for official statistics in the region in general and in specific subject matter areas. The paper further discusses issues of regional coordination, focusing in particular on the consistency of data published by national statistical offices and data published by international organizations. Specific points for discussion are suggested in paragraph 52.

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Report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia on regional statistical development in Western Asia

I. Introduction

1. The Statistical Commission considers statistical development in the regions covered by the regional commissions of the United Nations on a rotating basis. The Commission decided, at its forty-first session, that it would discuss developments in the Western Asia region at its forty-second session.

2. The regional work programme for statistical development in the region is based on statistics for evidence-based policymaking. It is steered by the Statistical Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and is executed by the Statistics Division of ESCWA. The membership of ESCWA is made up of 14 countries,[1] represented on the Statistical Committee of ESCWA by the heads of their national statistical offices. The Committee was established by ESCWA pursuant to resolution 179 (XVI) adopted at its sixteenth session. The Committee holds biennial sessions[2] to discuss strategic and programmatic issues, and elects its Bureau, composed of a Chair, two Vice-Chairs and a Rapporteur, from among the representatives of the members of the Committee, who are elected at each session and serve for a period of two years. In addition, the heads of the national statistical offices meet in February of each year, with a view to coming up with a regional position on the key issues for discussion and decision on the agenda of the Statistical Commission.

3. In order to support statistical development, ESCWA cooperates with other regional and international organizations that have a different concept for defining regions. Therefore, some of the activities concern the Arab countries (a region made up of 22 countries, including the 14 member countries of ESCWA, and Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia and Tunisia) or the so-called Middle East and North Africa region. Some of the technical cooperation projects, in particular projects included in the United Nations Development Account, are undertaken in cooperation with other regions that face the same technical issues in statistics.

4. On the occasion of its ninth session, in October 2010, the Statistical Committee launched a discussion aimed at establishing a midterm strategic vision for statistical development in the region. The strategy is to be finalized in the course of 2011, with an advanced draft expected in February 2011. Some elements of the strategy are reflected in the present document.

[1] The membership consists of Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

[2] The first session of the Statistical Committee was held in November 1995, with the subsequent sessions in February 1997, March 1999, April 2001, October 2002, October 2004, November 2006, October 2008 and October 2010.

II. Challenges to and priorities for statistical development in the Western Asia region

5. The priorities for official statistics in the region include the following:

(a) Implementing key methods and techniques for official statistics, such as national accounts;

(b) Harmonizing statistical databases;

(c) Capacity-building in various subject-matter areas, including poverty measurement and livelihood levels, population estimates, statistics on the informal sector, the trade in goods and in services, the environment, water, energy, agriculture, progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, labour and employment;

(d) Researching new methods for data collection, in particular administrative registers (including quality criteria for administrative registers used for statistical purposes);

(e) Advancing new approaches for the dissemination and communication of statistics;

(f) Defining national quality frameworks for official statistics;

(g) Expanding the utilization of geographic information systems for statistics;

(h) Unifying the classifications used at national statistical offices in the region.

6. The statistical cooperation between member countries should be utilized to a larger extent, and in particular, the transfer and exchange of expertise between ESCWA and other organizations active in the region should be facilitated. One way of achieving this may be intensifying technical cooperation with the United Nations and other international organizations active in statistics, in order to share the working methods and mechanisms of those organizations that specialize in statistical work.

III. Areas that are the primary focus of regional statistical development

A. Overview

7. With support from the Statistics Division, the objectives of the Statistical Committee include the following:

(a) To act as a centre of expertise and a forum for member countries of ESCWA to exchange views on statistical issues;

(b) To promote the exchange of expertise among member countries;

(c) To identify priorities and gaps in statistical capacity-building, by organizing and, where appropriate, coordinating capacity-building activities in cooperation with other regional and global organizations, including, but not limited

to, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics, MEDSTAT (the Euro-Mediterranean Statistical Cooperation programme), the League of Arab States, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, and the World Bank;

(d) To work in close cooperation with professional staff in the national statistical offices of member countries of ESCWA, in areas including data quality assurance and the implementation of international classifications and recommendations;

(e) To act as the steering body for subprogramme 5, Statistics for evidence-based policymaking, of programme 18, Economic and social development in Western Asia, of the strategic framework for the period 2012-2013 (see A/65/6 (Prog. 18)).

8. The statistical activities of ESCWA focus mainly on statistical capacity-building. ESCWA resolution 287 (XXV) concerns the strengthening of the statistical capacity of member countries of ESCWA for evidence-based policymaking. In that resolution, ESCWA was urged to produce indicators to assess regional progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, to adopt the common set of Core Information and Communications Technology Indicators issued by the global Partnership on Measuring Information and Communications Technology for Development and published by the International Telecommunication Union, and to make available the data related to those indicators for the review of strategic policies and workplans in areas of priority. The resolution calls upon member countries to accelerate the implementation of the System of National Accounts 1993 and its revisions, in order to enable policymakers to monitor economic changes and improve economic performance. Moreover, the resolution calls for the holding of training workshops on international concepts, classifications and standards.

9. The following sections of the present document bring particular issues regarding regional statistical development in Western Asia, in selected subject matter areas, to the attention of the Statistical Commission. These highlight areas of concern, mainly from the viewpoint of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA, as the main actor in regional statistics, and of the Statistics Division of ESCWA, as the implementing agency and facilitator. However, they also take into account the work of other actors, in particular those listed in paragraph 7 (c) above.

B. Implementation of the System of National Accounts

10. In the past few years, international organizations have held numerous technical workshops and high-level consultations to familiarize national accounts experts, users and policymakers with the System of National Accounts 2008 (2008 SNA) and to discuss the implementation strategy adopted by the Statistical Commission. At the regional level, events supported by ESCWA have included a regional workshop on national accounts, held in Cairo from 19 to 21 December 2006, an expert group meeting on national accounts, also held in Cairo, from 12 to 14 May 2009, a seminar on the implementation of the 2008 SNA in the Western Asia region, held in Muscat from 23 to 26 May 2010, and a high-level seminar on the implementation of the 2008 SNA in the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council), also held in Muscat, on 27 May 2010.

11. A survey of the status of implementation of the System of National Accounts in ESCWA member countries showed that there are a number of shortcomings and conceptual lapses in the compilation of national accounts in the region. The main issues to be addressed include:

(a) The incomplete coverage of national accounts in most member countries is, in most cases, the result of a lack of exhaustiveness of the accounts themselves. This relates to informal household units, but also extends to formal activities not adequately captured by traditional statistical survey instruments. The lack of updated business registers is also a common issue;

(b) Volume data: constant price estimates of production-side aggregates are mostly based on the consumer price index. The expenditure-side and income-side aggregates at constant prices are frequently not compiled. In many countries, the evaluation at current prices is also weak. In some cases, gross fixed capital formation is only estimated as an aggregated item. A true balancing process of the estimations from the different sides is seldom carried out;

(c) The household sector is not always appropriately defined for the compilation of the sequence of accounts;

(d) The Central Bank is not always treated as part of general Government;

(e) Expenditure on oil exploration is not included in capital formation or even in the value of output, although several Gulf countries have major oil reserves and consequently significant exploration activities;

(f) The reinvested earnings of foreign direct investment are not included in factor income from the rest of the world;

(g) Indirectly measured financial intermediation services are in most cases not allocated to the final users;

(h) Fixed asset consumption estimates are weak, generating problems in the estimation of gross and net values.

12. A series of actions should be undertaken in the medium term to improve the situation and accelerate the implementation process for the 2008 SNA. Some of the following activities are included in the work programme of the Statistics Division of ESCWA, while others are subject to the availability of external financial resources:

(a) Conducting regular annual assessments through questionnaires on national accounts and related economic statistics for the analysis of national statistical capacity and tracking progress made;

(b) Conducting missions to selected countries for initial assessment of national statistical capacity in national accounts and related economic statistics in the region;

(c) Organizing two subregional advocacy workshops (one for member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council and another for countries not members of the Council) to develop national strategic frameworks, inform stakeholders of the objectives of the project and raise funds;

(d) Conducting five regional training workshops during the time frame of the project for officials engaged in the fields covered (three on national accounts and two on related economic statistics);

(e) Conducting a regional training workshop on quality in national accounts and economic statistics;

(f) Organizing three regional expert group meetings on national accounts and related economic statistics;

(g) Providing financial support for five fellowships and study tours (once per year during the time frame of the project) on national accounts and related economic statistics, with a view to sharing best practice at the regional level;

(h) Providing facilitators for 28 technical assistance missions (two to each national statistical office in the region, each lasting five working days) on selected issues in national accounts and related economic statistics.

C. International Comparison Programme

13. The project proposal for the Western Asia region was prepared in early 2009. However, as the funds needed to launch the 2011 round of the International Comparison Programme were only transferred from the World Bank to ESCWA in June 2010, the secretariat was only able to conduct the first meeting for the launch of the 2011 round in the Western Asia region on 20 July 2010, in Beirut. The high-level meeting provided an opportunity for heads of national statistical offices, or their representatives, to meet and learn about developments in the new round of the programme and its governance structure, review and discuss the proposal and share views on national commitment and fund-raising strategies. The meeting also offered the opportunity for representatives to agree on the membership and structure of the Regional Executive Board of the International Comparison Programme for the 2011 round.

14. The meeting was followed by a two-day workshop, also held in Beirut, on 21 and 22 July 2010, attended by national coordinators for the International Comparison Programme, who have been assigned as programme focal points by each of the participating member countries. The workshop was the starting point for the official initiation of the 2011 round of implementation of the Programme in the ESCWA region. The second workshop for national coordinators took place from 4 to 7 October 2010 in Amman, and was organized in cooperation with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics.

D. Other areas of economic statistics

15. The ESCWA work programme comprises activities related to trade statistics and industry statistics. In both areas, the work combines capacity-building activities and data collection and dissemination.

16. In the statistics on international trade, ESCWA completed a project under the Development Account on strengthening merchandise trade statistics. The recent considerations show that there is a need to move the focus towards the statistics on international trade in services. ESCWA cooperates with the World Trade Organization, the World Bank Institute and the League of Arab States in this effort, and publishes an annual bulletin on international trade statistics, based on the data collected from ESCWA member countries.

17. ESCWA cooperates with the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization on capacity-building activities and the collection and dissemination of data on industry statistics. As a result of this cooperation, ESCWA and the organization were able to relaunch the publishing of industry statistics for 22 Arab countries.

18. In the further development of industry statistics in the Western Asia region, attention should be paid to the exchange of experience and expertise in establishing and maintaining statistical business registers, as a sampling frame for business and economic surveys. The region would also benefit from a project aimed at putting in place short-term economic statistics that would allow member countries to obtain statistical evidence of the seasonal features of their national economies.

E. Demographic statistics, including population, migration and censuses

19. Population estimates represent a major challenge in the region. There are several issues related to this. One is the discrepancy between estimates at the national level and those published by the United Nations. Another is the lack of some data related to population and vital statistics, in particular the basic rates. To this end, ESCWA and the regional office of the United Nations Population Fund, in Cairo, agreed to combine their efforts in building the capacity of national statistical offices in producing basic data and population estimates.

20. At its sixth session, held in Beirut from 6 to 8 October 2004, the Statistical Committee of ESCWA established the Task Force on Population and Housing Censuses. The objective of the Task Force is to support regional implementation of the World Population and Housing Census Programme during the period from 2005 to 2010. The Task Force has held six meetings with the objectives of: (a) revising the Arabic translation of the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses and its second revision, and making the necessary amendments; (b) addressing and discussing the role of the media in census-taking; (c) discussing the organization and conduct of city censuses; and (d) exchanging the relevant successful experiences and expertise among ESCWA member countries.

21. The Task Force proposed developing a regional programme for the 2020 round of population and housing censuses that, in addition to general capacity-building activities and exchange of expertise, would focus on the following tasks:

(a) To prepare a regional supplement to the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses that reflects the specificities of the region and addresses its experience in census-taking, in particular with regard to the methodologies and technologies used;

(b) To focus on the census documentation process;

(c) To analyse and use data, and conduct analytical studies that serve as a basis for the development of policies and programmes in the public and private sectors;

(d) To prepare scientific studies on the techniques used in conducting censuses, improving the quality and diversifying the means of cooperation among

stakeholders, and request countries with vast experience in that area to undertake the preparation of training material and knowledge transfer to other member countries;

(e) To diversify data dissemination techniques, including the geographic information systems technology;

(f) To use census data in the preparation of population projections;

(g) To invite a group of international statistical organizations to attend all the Task Force meetings, with a view to benefiting directly from the knowledge and experiences of their representatives.

F. Social statistics and indicators

22. The work undertaken by ESCWA in the area of social statistics and indicators relates to capacity-building and to data collection and dissemination on labour, health, culture, education, housing, household budgets and youth.

23. One of the major challenges is in the area of labour statistics. Efforts should be made in ESCWA member countries to implement labour force surveys at regular intervals, possibly with a view to producing quarterly and/or monthly data, in order to capture the seasonal fluctuation of the labour markets. Other aspects of labour statistics should also be addressed, for example, the quality of employment and decent work. ESCWA organized training workshops in cooperation with the Arab Labour Organization and plans to organize a joint workshop for Arab countries in cooperation with the International Labour Organization. The workshop would hopefully lead to longer term cooperation on sustainable capacity-building.

G. Gender statistics

24. ESCWA resolution 286 (XXV) concerned the strengthening of the capacity of ESCWA member countries to produce gender statistics for equality and empowerment of women, which are needed for planning and policymaking. The resolution calls upon member countries to adopt the set of indicators contained in the Arab Gender Issues and Indicators Framework and to produce statistics to be used for the monitoring and evaluation of strategic policies and workplans and to develop a mechanism for the collection, dissemination and analysis of gender-sensitive indicators and sex-disaggregated demographic data. It further encourages member countries to formulate and implement training programmes to incorporate gender indicators into their statistical systems, with a view to educating data producers and users about issues related to gender equality. In that resolution, ESCWA is requested to provide technical support to member countries in the form of advisory services and workshops, and to assist member countries in integrating a gender perspective into national strategies for the development of statistics and national statistical system plans of action.

25. ESCWA has developed the first Arab gender statistics database, entitled Arab GenInfo_09, which was launched at the second inter-agency and expert group meeting on gender statistics in the Arab region, held in Beirut from 12 to 14 October 2009. The secretariat plans to extend the database to include indicators on violence against women, in order to enable it to serve as an observatory for monitoring gender issues in member countries. ESCWA also prepared an initial draft of its

manual on the definitions, terms and methodologies used in gender statistics and the Arabic-English glossary on statistical terms on gender issues.

26. ESCWA has a role in ensuring that the cultural issues specific to the region are reflected in recommendations and guidelines. One of the examples is the adaptation of questionnaires on violence against women. The original questionnaire comprised questions that touched on culturally sensitive issues and had to be reformulated.

H. Environment statistics and accounting

27. ESCWA enhanced the capacity of officials to adopt international standards in energy and environment statistics, including by promoting the System of Integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting, which will become an international standard in 2012. In particular, ESCWA presented the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting for Water at a meeting of the Arab Ministerial Council for Water, and enlarged the geographical scope to the Arab region, covering 22 countries, in cooperation with the League of Arab States.

28. One of the specific aspects of environmental issues in the Western Asia region is a focus on water resources and the official statistics have to follow this priority. Therefore, the statistical work programmes have a specific section devoted to statistics on water.

29. Future work on environmental and water statistics in the ESCWA region should move towards the use of geographical information systems. Such systems may comprise data on small areas, land use and land cover, environmental indicators and indicators specific to water.

I. Energy statistics

30. ESCWA member countries were involved in the review of the Energy Statistics Manual, a publication compiled by the International Energy Agency of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), which has been translated into Arabic. ESCWA, in a further example of a coordinated approach to data collection from member countries, participates in the joint data collection on energy statistics, led by the International Energy Agency.

31. In the coming period ESCWA will execute a project, under the auspices of the Development Account, aimed at developing capacity for the collection and compilation of energy statistics and balances. It aims to tackle challenges of environmental statistics in the region, namely the harmonization of measurements and the completeness of energy statistics.

J. Measuring development

32. The Statistical Committee of ESCWA, at its ninth session, in October 2010, discussed a progress report on monitoring efforts to achieve the Millennium

Development Goals.[3] The report reveals significant advances made by the ESCWA member countries in reporting on their work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, with a 17 per cent increase in data availability since 2008. However, there are still some issues that persist in this area. Major differences exist between data reported by national and international sources. In 2010, in 15 per cent of cases (compared with 18 per cent of cases in 2008), the values reported both nationally and in the database of the Statistics Division, for the same indicator in the same year for a given country, matched exactly. A further 27 per cent of data points in 2010 (compared with 39 per cent in 2008), were consistent in value (with a positive or negative differential of 10 per cent) in both sources. By contrast, there were major discrepancies (differentials of over 10 per cent) in 58 per cent of data points in 2010, compared with 43 per cent in 2008. The Statistical Committee of ESCWA requested the Statistics Division of ESCWA to address this alarming situation, to defend the data emanating from national official statistics and to work with other organizations towards decreasing the discrepancies.

33. ESCWA is a partner in the Global Project on "Measuring the Progress of Societies" and a member of its board. As part of its activities in this field, ESCWA was represented at the third OECD World Forum on the theme "Statistics, Knowledge and Policy", held in Busan, Republic of Korea, from 27 to 30 October 2009 and gave a presentation on the role of statistical monitoring in times of crisis. In addition, the secretariat offered financial support to member countries eligible for such funding in order to enable them to participate in the Forum. ESCWA and OECD have made joint efforts towards fund-raising for regional implementation of the Global Project and during the Forum the Executive Secretary of ESCWA and the Secretary-General of OECD signed a memorandum of understanding on future cooperation between the two organizations in this area.

34. ESCWA cooperated with the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics on the preparation of the first meeting of the steering committee and the workshop on progress of societies, held in Amman on 3 and 4 October 2009, and also organized the first coordinators' workshop on measuring the well-being and progress of Arab societies, held in Beirut from 1 to 5 November 2010.

IV. Challenges to regional statistical coordination

35. The various regional organizations active in Western Asia have different concepts of the region, including the geographical concept used by the United Nations, the concept of an "Arab region" or the concept of a group of Islamic countries, and some organizations also use the concept of the Middle East and North Africa. The regional organizations active in statistics are: ESCWA, the League of Arab States and its specialized agencies, the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics, the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, the Islamic Development Bank and MEDSTAT.

36. Bearing in mind the geographical and cultural proximity, ESCWA coordinates with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and its subregional office for North Africa on statistical activities for Arab countries.

[3] See E/ESCWA/SD/2010/IG.1/9 for more information.

37. The following organizations working at the global level are also actors in regional statistical coordination and cooperation in Western Asia: the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, principally through its Statistics Division; the International Monetary Fund; the World Bank; and the specialized agencies of the United Nations, both at Headquarters and through their regional offices.

38. Challenges related to the coordination of statistical activities in the region have several layers. The first is the necessity, for all actors in official statistics in the region, of producing consistent data. This is important for fostering trust and confidence in official statistics. The national statistical offices in Western Asia have repeatedly expressed their concern about the lack of coordination that leads to a high reporting burden, as well as important discrepancies between data disseminated by various international and regional organizations. In particular, they expect that ESCWA will lead the coordination of efforts in the region.

39. The second is capacity-building in statistics. This is the major responsibility of the organizations listed in paragraphs 35 and 37 towards the national statistical offices. Resource allocation does not allow any of those organizations, individually, to cover all requirements for the transfer of expertise and capacity-building. A combined effort would allow for greater efficiency, avoid duplication and cover existing gaps. Taking into account the language issues, it appears reasonable to consider combined workshops for all Arab countries. In this respect, cooperation between ECA and ESCWA and with the League of Arab States is a logical core from which to build a statistical coordination mechanism in the region.

40. International and regional organizations should assist member countries in establishing coordinating mechanisms between the statistical departments of their various ministries and central statistical offices in order to achieve statistical integration and obtain accurate and consistent statistical results and information. In other words, the international organizations should respect the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the role of statistical offices in the national coordination of official statistics, by including the national statistical offices in their activities and avoiding shortcuts in data collection. The reporting burden for member countries and inconsistencies in data collection, owing to the lack of coordination between international organizations in the structure and time frame of their surveys, persist as major issues in the region.

V. Institution-building of official statistics in the region

41. ESCWA resolution 283 (XXV) calls on member countries to take all necessary measures to produce high-quality official statistics for use in international comparisons. Such measures include applying international concepts, classifications and standards, adopting and applying the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, ensuring the credibility, impartiality and autonomy of statistical institutions and enhancing the credibility of statistics at the national, regional and international levels. The resolution also asks member countries to complete the design and implementation of national strategies for statistical development in accordance with the general orientations issued by the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century. The resolution appeals for the enhancement of the position of the national statistical machinery within the national institutional

structure and the strengthening of the structural factors that are connected to the legislative framework and regulatory arrangements.

42. The monitoring of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics shows that most of the ESCWA member countries implemented at least six to eight of the Fundamental Principles, with three countries reporting full compliance with the Fundamental Principles.[4] This is an encouraging result, given that the implementation of the Fundamental Principles depends on many factors external to the statistical systems.

43. Of the 14 ESCWA member countries, 10 have completed their national strategies for the development of statistics, with two additional countries in the process of approval of their strategies. The strategies are available from the ESCWA website.

44. The ESCWA Statistical Committee has stressed the importance of the data dissemination standards set by the International Monetary Fund. Several ESCWA member countries are compliant with the conditions of the Special Data Dissemination Standard, namely Bahrain (as of 29 August 2008), Iraq (as of 15 December 2009), Jordan (as of 28 January 2010) and the United Arab Emirates (as of 31 July 2008).

VI. Ways forward

45. Future regional statistical work in the ESCWA region should support the further development of national statistical systems. The Statistical Committee of ESCWA made the following recommendations at its ninth session, in October 2010:

(a) A primary role of ESCWA should be to provide expertise to member countries through the core staff of the Statistics Division, regional advisers and consultants. The Statistics Division should create a team that will manage statistical training and the tracking of technical assistance requests;

(b) It is necessary to prioritize with respect to available resources. ESCWA should identify and cover the most common needs of national statistical systems;

(c) The training of trainers should be a leading approach, to ensure that the knowledge acquired through training programmes, seminars and workshops is further spread in national statistical offices. This would also ensure that the knowledge is not lost in the case of changes in staff;

(d) The member countries of ESCWA demand more focus on new statistical methods and techniques. This includes the use of administrative registers and records as a source of statistical data, geographical information systems and taking advantage of new technologies;

(e) ESCWA is called upon to assist member countries in building and strengthening their national statistical systems, in particular with respect to statistical legislation and statistical infrastructure in line with the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics;

[4] For more details and further information related to the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in Western Asia, see the ESCWA Virtual Library at www.escwa.un.org/divisions/scu/themes/main.asp?ID=6.

(f) A specific focus of the ESCWA region should include attention to the development of statistics in countries and areas stricken by conflicts.

46. The quality of statistical data disseminated by international organizations is of great concern to the member countries of ESCWA. There is a persistent problem that these data differ significantly from data disseminated by national statistical offices. Reasons for these discrepancies are not always obvious. National statistical offices also feel a significant burden owing to the numerous statistical questionnaires received from international organizations. In order to address this issue, ESCWA proposes that:

(a) ESCWA should focus its data work (for the purposes of its publications) on the direct collection of data from member countries. Results of this data collection should be stored and made available to other users (including other international organizations) in a data bank maintained by ESCWA;

(b) The Statistics Division of ESCWA should intensify coordination in data collection. Firstly, it should consolidate and coordinate all data requests emanating from ESCWA. Secondly, when sending statistical questionnaires, ESCWA should always keep national statistical offices involved, including in cases when data are produced by other ministries or Government agencies. Finally, ESCWA should actively promote the use of questionnaires to be shared with other international organizations (primarily organizations of the United Nations system) in order to diminish the response burden and to improve the consistency of data requests.

47. Members of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA are currently in discussions on the strategic vision for statistical work in the region in the five-year period to 2016.

Proposed operating mode of the Statistical Committee of ESCWA

48. The following principles reflect the operating mode of the Statistical Committee as it is currently formulated, with the addition, in subsequent paragraphs, of a number of recommendations offered with a view to making the statistical work programme of ESCWA more systematic and more closely focused on broad statistical areas, rather than on individual outputs. The Statistical Committee will further elaborate on this proposal as part of ongoing discussions. The principles are:

(a) The Statistical Committee meets once every two years, in the month of October in even-numbered years;

(b) The Bureau of the Statistical Committee may initiate written consultation with member countries on issues that it deems to be of importance;

(c) The Working Group of the Statistical Committee meets once a year in February, prior to the session of the Statistical Commission, with the major objective of coordinating the regional position on issues to be discussed at the session of the Commission;

(d) Permanent teams or groups of experts will ensure the sustainability of statistical capacity-building. Their role will be to follow up developments in statistical areas, both within ESCWA and globally, prepare recommendations and advise the Statistical Committee, its Bureau and Working Group.

49. There should be a small number of permanent teams or groups of experts. Members of each team or group should be delegated by national statistical offices, and the Statistics Division at ESCWA should assign a staff member to each team or group as a facilitator. The membership may also include external experts with advanced knowledge in the subject matter. The teams or groups will follow matters in their respective areas, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experience, ensuring that links with such global groups as the Statistical Division city groups are maintained, and making expert recommendations to the Statistical Committee and its Working Group. Such recommendations may include the adoption of common positions with regard to the Statistical Commission, suggestions for workshop programmes and the ongoing maintenance of online content on best practice.

50. The creation and dissolution of the groups should be subject to approval by the Committee and the Bureau. Drawing on experience from other regions, it may be wise to restrict the number of groups to the main strategic areas in order to keep them optimally manageable.

51. The groups should have clear mandates and terms of reference, which should be periodically reviewed by the Committee. At the time of writing the present report, the strategic vision was still in discussion. The final list of groups may, therefore, be slightly different from the following proposal:

(a) National accounts (as a major statistical issue, the implementation of SNA 2008 arguably warrants a specific group);

(b) Economic statistics, other than national accounts;

(c) Social statistics, including the work of the Task Force on Population and Housing Censuses;

(d) Statistics on employment;

(e) Environment, water and energy statistics;

(f) Gender statistics, including the work of the Task Force on Gender Statistics;

(g) New and innovative methods and techniques in statistics, including the use of administrative records and registers and geographical information systems.

VII. Action to be taken by the Statistical Commission

52. The Commission may wish to:

(a) Comment on the issues of statistical development in individual subject matter areas highlighted in section III of the present document;

(b) Provide guidance on strengthening regional statistical cooperation, taking into account the challenges listed in section IV;

(c) Comment on the measures taken by the countries of Western Asia with respect to the institution-building of official statistics in the region, outlined in section V;

(d) Advise on the challenge of creating a regional strategy among the countries of Western Asia to further the development of statistics, in particular proposals outlined in section VI;

(e) Make suggestions concerning the operation of the working groups.